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ABSTRACT

These two papers look at international aspects of quality in higher education from contrasting perspectives. The first paper, "Higher Education Quality: A European Dimension" by John Brennan asks whether there is a distinctive European dimension to quality in higher education and, if so, what are its implications for British institutions and their students. The first part of this paper reviews current higher education policy developments in the European Community and considers the issues which they raise for quality. The second part of Brennan's paper reports on the results of a number of recent projects which have attempted to assess the quality of educational programs across several countries and considers implications of these studies for British institutions. The second paper is "Towards a General Model of Quality Assessment in Higher Education" by Frans A. van Vught. It proposes a general model of quality assessment consisting of a number of elements. It puts these elements in an historical context of quality assessment in medieval universities and makes a distinction between the intrinsic and extrinsic values of higher education and types of assessment related to each. It also deduces the elements from recent experiences with quality assessment in the United States, Canada, France, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom. (JB)

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QUALITY SUPPORT CENTRE

Questions of Quality: in Europe and beyond

by John Brennan and Frans van Vught

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Higher Education Report No 1

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Questions of Quality: in Europe and beyond

by John Brennan and Frans van Vught

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FOREWORD

This is the first in a series of reports to be published by the Quality Support Centre (QSC) on issues concerned with quality in higher education.

QSC was formed out of the research, development and information services of the Council for National Academic Awards at the end of 1992. It seeks to provide an independent voice on questions of quality in higher education. As well as publications, it undertakes projects and consultancy work and provides an annual programme of conferences and workshops on higher education themes.

For further information about the work of QSC, contact either John Brennan (Head of Quality Support) or Tarla Shah (Administrator) at Quality Support Centre, The Open University, 344-354 Gray's Inn Road, London WC1X 8BP, tel: (0) 71 278 4411, fax: (0) 71 837 0290.

QSC Higher Education Report No 1

Questions of Quality: in Europe and beyond

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Questions of Quality: in Europe and beyond

Preface

The two papers in this report look at international aspects of quality in higher education from contrasting perspectives. The first paper, by John Brennan, looks at the various 'needs' and 'opportunities' for higher education institutions to be active in Europe and the implications for quality which they raise. It goes on to review the results of recent studies of the comparative quality of educational programmes in several European countries.

The second paper, by Frans van Vught, examines the various systems of quality assessment and assurance which have been developed in North America and Western Europe and, out of them, sets out a general model of quality assessment in higher education.

As readers endeavour to respond to the latest demands of the particular quality systems to which they are subject, many may feel less than well-disposed to 'questions of quality'. However, as van Vught points out in his paper, they are not new to higher education and can be traced back to the medieval origins of our higher education institutions. If today they are taking on a new form and being asked with a new urgency, it is perhaps a reflection of the greater visibility and centrality which a 'mass' system of higher education has in modern society. Whether the answers currently being given to the 'questions' are adequate remains to be seen.

John Brennan is Head of the Quality Support Centre at the UK Open University. His paper is based on a presentation to the Society for Research into Higher Education at Nottingham Trent University in December 1992.

Frans van Vught is the Director of the Centre for Higher Education Policy Studies at the University of Twente in the Netherlands where he is also Professor of Public Administration. His paper is based on one originally presented at the inaugural seminar of the Quality Support Centre held in London in February 1993.

Higher education quality:

a European dimension

John Brennan

Higher education quality: a European dimension?

Summary

This paper asks whether there is a distinctive European dimension to quality in higher education and, if so, what are its implications for British institutions and their students. The first part of the paper reviews current higher education policy developments in the European Community and considers the issues which they raise for quality. The second part reports on the results of a number of recent projects which have attempted to assess the quality of educational programmes across several countries. Finally, some implications for higher education in Britain are raised.

1 Introduction

Higher education in the United Kingdom takes place in over 200 diverse institutions, some called universities some not. Higher education in the Member States of the European Community takes place in over 3,500 diverse institutions, some called universities some not. Increasingly, individual higher education institutions are finding it necessary to relate to at least some of these other 3,500 institutions and to take into account the work of many more. Students, employers and broader publics confront and try to understand a diversity and complexity of higher education provision in their national systems and relate it to their own often ill-defined needs. Those needs, and wants and aspirations, will lead an increasing number of them into contact with higher education institutions in other countries where even greater diversity and complexity will be found.

The assessment and assurance of quality in higher education is an issue high on the agenda of governments, national agencies and higher education institutions in many parts of the world. In the companion paper to this essay, Frans van Vught reviews approaches to quality assessment and assurance that are developing internationally and considers what is appropriate to European higher education. This paper asks whether there is a distinctive European dimension to quality in higher education and, if so, what are its implications for British institutions and their students.

Many readers of this paper will be actively involved in collaborative work with other European higher education institutions through ERASMUS, COMETT and other EC programmes as well as through individual research contacts. Through activities of these kinds, there is growing awareness of the differences in structure and tradition that exist across the countries of Europe and of

recent changes and developments which are by no means always convergent. Thus, one country gets rid of its binary system while others reinforce theirs. The very point of European collaboration is generally that it provides 'something different' yet differences frequently are at the heart of operational problems faced by institutions, their staff and their students: how to 'evaluate', how to 'fit' an educational experience or qualification from one system into the structure of educational programmes and qualifications of another? And what are the implications of getting it wrong?

This paper is divided into two main parts. The first reviews current higher education policy developments in the European Community and considers the issues which they raise for quality. The second part reports on the results of a number of recent projects which have attempted to assess the quality of educational programmes across several countries. Finally, some implications for higher education in Britain are raised.

2 The EC dimension

In November 1991, the Commission of the European Community published a *Memorandum on Higher Education in the European Community*, the main principles of which were later included in the Maastricht Treaty. Although much of the Memorandum is fairly bland and addressed primarily towards the changing role of **national** systems of higher education, it also states the main features of what the Commission sees as an EC dimension to higher education. These are discussed under the following sub-headings:

- student mobility within the Community

- co-operation between institutions at European level
- the central importance of language
- the training of teachers
- the recognition of qualifications and periods of study
- the international role of higher education
- information and policy analysis
- dialogue with the higher education sector

At the heart of the Commission's concerns lies the central provision of the Single European Act which states:

"The internal market shall comprise an area without frontiers in which the free movement of goods, persons, services and capital is ensured in accordance with the provisions of the Treaty." (Com(91)p6)

To be successful, the Memorandum goes on, the Internal Market

"depends to a large degree on the capacity of people to accept and exploit the freedoms accorded to them, to be able, where necessary or desired, to live and work in other Member States of the Community, to trade and offer services across national boundaries and to co-operate effectively with partners in other parts of the Community in agreements, contracts and joint undertakings." (ibid p6)

This is what ERASMUS and other EC programmes are meant to achieve. Although ostensibly about student

mobility, such programmes address central aspects of the relationship between higher education and a labour market which is becoming increasingly Europeanised. The mutual recognition of professional qualifications and the mobility of labour within a developing European labour market pose many questions for higher education systems designed primarily with national and regional purposes in mind and characterised by enormous diversity in the content, level, duration and structure of courses and in the numbers and the educational and cultural backgrounds of their students. Post-Maastricht emphasis on subsidiarity does not remove the questions although it may rule out certain kinds of answer to them.

The questions for quality are stated in the Memorandum in the following way:

"The widening perspectives of higher education institutions in Europe would add a European dimension to the entire question of quality. Quality judgements would tend to influence institutional choices in the establishment of partnerships and participation in networks within European structures and would also be a factor in the granting of academic recognition and hence in facilitating mobility. These judgements will also come into play among students in exercising their choice of institution and course in a more open and accessible European market for higher education. Employers too will need to exercise quality judgements in a single European labour market in which mobility is underpinned by mutual recognition of diplomas for professional purposes. It is important in this wider perspective that quality is viewed as a larger issue than comparison within and between Member States and that the potential for exchange of experience and for co-operation at Community level in the determination of the parameters of

quality and in their assessment be exploited as fully as possible." (ibid p14)

What this means in practice is that all sorts of groups are having to make judgements about the quality of higher education programmes and qualifications but must do so in an almost complete absence of criteria and information. Unfamiliar terminology, cultural assumptions and the sheer size and complexity of European higher education make it virtually impossible for the majority of these judgements to be soundly based. Quality judgements about Europe's leading research universities might be reached fairly readily - whether justifiably so is another matter - but, as has already been noted, there are over 3,500 higher education institutions in the EC Member States. What, for example, is to be regarded as 'university equivalent' among the highly variegated non-university institutions and sectors of the twelve Member States?

However, judgements have to be made and are being made. Trial and error is a not unreasonable approach for institutions but less attractive for individual students. There are also the various frameworks for mutual professional and academic recognition such as the National Academic Recognition Information Centres (NARIC) and the European Community Course Credit Transfer System (ECTS). Useful though these are, they are based on assumptions of the transposition of structures and conventions from one country to another which have not been tested. In a sense, the wider implementation of these schemes will test the assumptions on which they are based but, in the process, some potentially embarrassing questions may be raised about the relative quality of different educational systems and institutions. And whatever is agreed to be 'formally equivalent' may not be accepted as

such by the different interest groups - academics, students, employers, for example.

The interests of different groups in the European quality issue are partly stated in the EC Memorandum but are more general than the Commission's principal concerns. Below are five aspects of the European dimension to quality which impinge on different interest groups in different ways. The aspects are:

- student mobility
- academic and institutional links
- graduate employment
- economic competitiveness
- quality enhancement

Student mobility is perhaps the most visible aspect of the Europeanisation of higher education. (Indeed, too visible according to the UK Government's response to the EC Memorandum which calls for greater attention to be given to providing a European dimension to the higher education of students not involved in mobility programmes by developing staff mobility, language proficiency training, open and distance learning, and international collaboration between institutions in developing the European dimension of the curriculum (DFE 1992).) Student mobility poses distinct challenges for the students, the programmes they enrol on and the staff who teach and assess them. For the student, there is at least the possibility that the acquisition of a 'European dimension' may be at the expense of other academic and professional competencies. A cost-benefit analysis of where to go, whether to go and what to do is

virtually impossible. There is every prospect of repeating material, missing material, finding levels too low or too high, encountering teaching and assessment methods which develop and reward unfamiliar competencies. And, particularly for students outside of the recognised EC schemes, there remain questions of the 'value' that will be attached to the credentials or part-credentials gained. For teaching staff and for study programmes, the problems are the problems of open-access modular programmes writ large. What assumptions to make about prior knowledge and skills, pace and approach to learning and assessment, duration and sequence of study?

Academic and institutional links with European partners exist for most UK higher education institutions. But who to link with? Several institutions and departments are now realising that partnerships previously entered into may have some unwelcome implications for their own standing and reputation. An ERASMUS partnership between a postgraduate course at one institution and a sub-degree professional course at another institution may raise questions about the standards of the postgraduate course. A college regarded as of university equivalent status in its national system which links with a college which lacks such equivalence may jeopardise the international standing of the former. Higher education systems are not entirely consumed by status hierarchies but these do exist to a greater or lesser extent in most systems and are frequently difficult to penetrate by outsiders. In a European system of 3500 diverse institutions, the difficulties of finding the right partners are real as are the potential costs of getting it wrong.

Graduate employment, if the aims of the Single Market are achieved, will entail periods of working abroad for many people. Thus, the labour market in which graduates

compete for jobs will be a European one. Graduates will be competing against graduates from other institutions and other countries. Many employers will be casting their recruitment nets beyond the confines of single countries and finding a considerable extension of choice by so doing; the choice between, for example, the knowledge and skills of a typical twenty-eight year old German graduate against the knowledge and skills of a typical twenty-one year old British graduate. Of course, the growing diversity of national systems themselves will lessen the starkness of such choices. But perceptions (and realities) of differences in the qualities of graduates from different institutions and programmes will inevitably be extended to differences between graduates from different countries.

Economic competitiveness of the separate Member States, however, will continue to be much more heavily influenced by the quality of home-grown labour. Thus, quality differences matter even when they concern the majority of students who will neither study nor work abroad. It is a concern for whether their graduates are 'good enough' that has prompted at least one government to sponsor studies of their quality relative to the graduates of neighbouring countries.

Quality enhancement is a major objective of most of the new quality assessment and assurance systems which are being set up in Europe. Just as the exchange of information and identification of good practice across a national system is a key mechanism towards its improvement, so too are such processes at a European level. Increased contact between systems will inevitably foster increased sharing of practice leading possibly, but not necessarily, to greater convergence in higher education developments across the EC.

However overstated some of these aspects of the European dimension to quality might be and even if European connections remain at their current substantial margin in British higher education, questions of comparability of quality are raised by them. ERASMUS students from different countries *are* performing differently on the same educational programmes. Mobile academic staff and students can see directly differences in programme content and levels in different countries.

The next section considers the results of some recent studies which have attempted to compare systematically the qualities of educational programmes in different countries.

3 Comparing qualities

The first thing to emphasis is that quality in higher education is multi-dimensional. Thus, attempts to compare the qualities of different programmes, institutions and systems of higher education need not, and should not, involve rankings or the construction of league tables. Particularly when comparisons are international, differences in context, in purpose and in tradition render any uni-dimensional attempt at comparison impossible. Comparison can at best only identify dimensions of quality within which differences and similarities may be found. That said, however, the multi-dimensionality of quality does not imply the impossibility, at least in principle, of identifying differences in levels of student achievement between programmes, institutions and systems. Levels of student achievement are one dimension of quality.

There have been four recent European studies of the quality of higher education in different countries. All focus on the comparison of study programmes and all share a similar methodology.

In 1992, the Swedish National Board of Universities and Colleges published a report on *Business Administration and Economics Study Programmes* (NBUC 1992). This report examined study programmes in five Swedish institutions with comparable programmes in the United Kingdom, Finland, France, Germany and the Netherlands.

In the same year the International Programme Review Committee for Electrical Engineering of the Association of Universities in the Netherlands (VSNU) published its *International Programme Review of Electrical Engineering* (Vroeijenstijn et al 1992) involving examination of electrical engineering programmes in the Netherlands, Sweden, Germany, Switzerland, Belgium and the United Kingdom, although the results for the latter are not reported in full.

The third study was carried out jointly by the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) in the United Kingdom, the Centre for Higher Education Policy Studies (CHEPS) at the University of Twente in the Netherlands and the Hochschule Informations System (HIS) in Germany. It looked at economics programmes in the three countries. A report of this project was published in 1992 (Brennan et al 1992).

A fourth study has recently been completed by the American Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET) working in association with the Centre for Higher Education Policy Studies (CHEPS). Like two of the previous three projects, it was funded by the Dutch Government and examined engineering programmes (civil, mechanical and chemical) in the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, France and Switzerland. A report was published in autumn 1993 (Goedegebuure et al 1993)

The common methodological element of all four studies has been the use of international peer review. Academic experts in the relevant disciplines from several countries examined programme documentation and, in most cases, had opportunities to discuss it with representatives of the programmes being examined. The details of the studies varied but the essential method was the application to international quality comparison of the peer review methods developed by accreditation bodies in North America and by quality assurance agencies in Europe such as the CNAA and the VSNU.

All of the studies can best be regarded as attempts to develop methods of quality comparison. The reports so far published reveal complexities and ambiguities which make it difficult to draw definitive conclusions. But they do succeed in providing some clear pointers to issues that will need to be addressed by higher education institutions and national governments as the 'Europeanisation' of higher education continues.

Three of the four studies mentioned above tended to look at quality comparisons from the point of view of one (ie the funding) nation. In other words, a prime purpose was to see how one country 'was doing' in terms of the qualities of higher education found in neighbouring countries. As none of these three studies was supported from within the United Kingdom, the conclusions and recommendations of their reports have perhaps less to say to a United Kingdom readership than the fourth jointly sponsored study. For this reason we shall concentrate on the study of economics in Germany, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom carried out jointly by HIS, CHEPS and CNAA with funding from the Dutch government and from CNAA.

The project looked at ten undergraduate economics programmes: three from German universities, three from Dutch universities, two from universities in the United Kingdom and a further two in the United Kingdom from institutions that were polytechnics at the time of the study but have since been awarded university titles. Non-university institutions in Germany and the Netherlands were excluded from the project on the grounds that their programmes of study were not regarded as directly equivalent to university programmes within their respective countries. Degrees from UK polytechnics on the other hand were regarded as the direct equivalent of university degrees.

The study was designed primarily as an exercise in the development of a suitable method for quality comparison. The method employed by the project involved two distinct stages:

- collection and analysis of descriptive information about higher education systems and study programmes;

- international peer review of selected study programmes.

The objective of the first stage was to gather relevant information about the three higher education systems on which the peers could base their judgements about the ten programmes under study. Detailed quantitative and qualitative data about the ten economics programmes were also collected as was contextual information about the general features of education and training provision in economics in the three countries. The aim of the peer review stage was:

"to come to a balanced judgement on the quality differences between comparable categories of graduates in Germany, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, in the circumstances of the different structural characteristics of the higher education systems and education programmes" (Brennan et al 1992 p23).

The international peer committee was formed out of economists, drawn from the three countries, who were not connected with the ten institutions providing the programmes for the study - nine economists representing both university and commercial backgrounds - together with a group of eight economists from eight of the nine study programmes. During a two day meeting in Utrecht the two groups of economists ('external' and 'internal') examined the programme and other documentation independently of each other but there was opportunity also for dialogue between the internal and external peers. A report of the main findings of the peer review was agreed by all 17 of the participating economists and was subsequently published as part of the report of the project.

Although, as has been stated, the purpose of the project was primarily to develop a method for comparative quality assessment, the report does identify a number of points of similarity and difference between the study programmes in the three participating countries. The general conclusions of the international peer review of economics are summarised as follows:

- there was broad comparability of content of programmes, particularly of core curriculum components

- differences in the length of programmes and in teaching and assessment methods suggested differences in learning outcomes

- there was less attention given to and lower levels of student achievement in statistical and quantitive methods in the UK programmes

- there were clear differences in programme objectives with the UK programmes being less concerned with professional preparation and more concerned with general intellectual development

- some members of the peer group believed that a UK Master's programme would have been a more suitable comparator

- differences in study programmes could be related to different 'boundary' conditions set by the national contexts (for example, characteristics of secondary education and relationships between higher education and the labour market)

- age and maturity differences between students in the three countries influenced the design and delivery of courses and levels of student achievement (UK students being on average significantly younger)

- UK courses were more specialist with less opportunity to study non-economics courses

The above conclusions do not indicate that there is a clear 'best buy' in economics degrees, but they do suggest that students - and by extension employers and society at large - will be getting somewhat different things according to where in Europe they study.

The conclusions of the other studies have similar implications. The report on electrical engineering goes so far as to conclude that:

"the Committee has the impression that the English Mechanical Engineering programmes of 4 years are below the level of the Master of Engineering programmes in West European (mainland) universities" (Vroeijenstijn et al 1992, p61).

and goes on to question whether, given the role of the professional engineering institutions in Britain, UK engineering degrees can sensibly be compared with their continental counterparts at all. For this reason, the United Kingdom has been excluded from the most recent comparative study of civil, chemical and mechanical engineering programmes.

The Swedish sponsored study of business administration and economics programmes concentrated almost exclusively on the implications for Sweden, noting a major need for more diversification and flexibility in the Swedish programmes and making several recommendations for how this might be achieved.

4 Implications

The Swedish study of business administration and economics contains a statement about the objectives of comparative quality assessment which might have a general applicability. The report states:

"The basic assumption is that there is no such thing as "the" best business school, in absolute terms. The needs, constraints and opportunities in the environment are various. Each institution has to define which needs it is

going to meet and with what resources. Any educational system should include schools which have opted to serve different needs, which consequently made different choices and therefore operate with different resources. Whether the system as a whole will satisfy the requirements of a given environment is determined by the variety and complementarity of the institutions as much as by the characteristics of each institution considered separately. The purpose of our study is neither a classification of institutions nor a comparison between institutions and their counterparts outside Sweden. Rather, we want to shed some light on how the system as a whole interacts with and responds to the present and future needs of the environment, judging from different profiles of institutions and their output, as compared to similar profiles and their output in some other countries" (NBUC 1992, p9).

What light then is shed on the issues facing British higher education institutions by these comparative studies of higher education quality, bearing in mind that none of the studies was designed to focus directly on British issues ?

It is well known that English (if not necessarily Scottish) first degrees are short by international comparison. Traditionally, this has been justified by the specialist preparation provided by A levels and, to a lesser extent, by more favourable student:staff ratios and greater attention to teaching within higher education. Neither feature is by any means universal in British higher education today. Few of the innovative multidisciplinary degree courses introduced in recent decades build directly on specialist A levels. Students enter higher education via an increasing variety of routes. Declining resources are pushing up student:staff ratios and reducing the amounts of personal tuition for students.

There have been no studies of the effects of any of these recent changes. It would be misleading to claim that the tentative results of European studies of higher education quality tell us anything about the effects of recent changes in Britain. Indeed, engineering and economics students usually *have* previously studied relevant specialist A levels and courses in both subject areas can probably be regarded as being at the "traditionalist" end of the present curriculum map. That being so, the comparative studies would seem to suggest that programmes of study in the mainstream subjects and institutions of British higher education are different from their counterparts in neighbouring European countries in a number of ways.

English first degrees provide a quick way to obtaining a degree qualification. But there is at least some evidence to suggest that they are not fully equivalent to their continental counterparts in either the range of their curriculum or in the levels of their students' achievements. This may partly be to do with the length of study, but also partly to do with the relative youth of the students and the characteristics of their secondary education. In many subject fields, a British first degree has to be "topped up" with a further professional qualification to meet the needs of employment, needs which seem to be met more commonly *within* the degree programmes of other European educational systems.

Within a European context, this is all a part of the diversity of what is on offer across the 3,500 higher education institutions of the 12 Members States. Ministries in several of these countries are looking for ways of reducing the length of study programmes and cutting the costs of their higher education provision. They may look enviously towards Britain in this respect. Another distinctive feature of the British system appears to be its efficiency: a high

proportion of students complete their courses and do so within the advertised time. Whether this is to do with the nature of the programmes or their assessment modes and whether it is related to the standards of their output is difficult to tell. But viewed from the perspective of system efficiency, it also seems to be a positive feature.

Some of the governments in neighbouring European countries have, as we have noted, been asking whether their graduates are "good enough". The question in this form has not been asked to any great extent in Britain. It invites in any event the question "good enough for what?" In the context of this paper, the answer may be found in the issues posed by the Dutch Minister of Education and Science in 1988: whether Dutch higher education (and its graduates) would be suitably prepared for the international competition arising out of the integrated European market.

The advent of quality assessment in European higher education may go some way towards answering questions of this sort, particularly if the newly established national quality assessment agencies are reasonably open to each other's processes and outcomes. Further studies of the differences between study programmes in different countries may add to our understanding of the relationship between the structure, content and process of higher education programmes of study and the qualities and competencies of the graduates who emerge from them.

The need for students with British degree qualifications to obtain additional professional qualifications may increase if employers operating within the Single Market move towards standardised entry requirements. As students, parents and employers become more knowledgeable about what is on offer in European higher education, choices may

come to be made between systems as well as between institutions and programmes.

The conclusion of the Swedish study mentioned above was that greater diversity was needed in Swedish higher education. There is considerable diversity in Britain's higher education institutions already. It remains to be seen whether this diversity will increase to embrace some of the features and qualities found within other traditions of higher education in Europe.

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Towards a general model of quality assessment in higher education

Frans A. van Vught

Towards a general model of quality assessment in higher education

Summary

In this paper a number of elements of a general model of quality assessment in higher education are presented. These elements are, on the one hand, put in a historical context of quality assessment in Medieval universities and, on the other hand, deduced from the recent experiences with quality assessment in both North American and Western European countries. With respect to the historical context a distinction is made between the intrinsic and the extrinsic values of higher education. Two types of quality assessment related to these values are also distinguished. Concerning the recent experiences with quality assessment systems, the practices in the USA, Canada, France, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom are explored. The elements of the suggested general model of quality assessment are traced back to these practices.

1 The historical roots of quality assessment in higher education

From the early days of higher education on, the assessment of the quality of their processes and products has been an important focus of attention for higher education institutions. In this historical attention for quality a certain tension is found which we nowadays still experience and which sometimes appears to be the source of heated debates.

Already in Medieval higher education a distinction can be made between two extreme models of quality assessment. Neither of these two models is of course found in the actual history of European higher education. The models rather point to two crucial dimensions of quality assessment in higher education. Referring to their historical backgrounds, I will call one model the French model of vesting control in an external authority (Cobban 1988 p124). The other model I will call the English model of a self-governing community of fellows.

The French model can be illustrated with the dramatic struggle for autonomy by the University of Paris in the early thirteenth century. It was the chancellor of the cathedral of Notre Dame, acting as the delegate of the bishop of Paris, who represented the then dominating episcopal outlook that the universities should be seen as 'ecclesiastical colonies'. The universities were viewed as higher forms of education that were however to be integrated in the ecclesiastical structure and that were to remain under episcopal authority. The chancellor of the cathedral of Notre Dame was an external official set above the masters' guild. As such he claimed the authority to grant or to withhold the teaching license and he claimed the right to decide about the content of studies. The masters fought

the chancellor's authority. And after a long and bitter conflict, Pope Gregory IX in his bull called *Parens Scientiarum* (1231) finally made an end to the dominance of the bishop and the chancellor over the masters' guild (Cobban 1975,pp 76-84).

The English model of self-governance has its origins in the aspirations of the masters at the Medieval Universities of Oxford and Cambridge to be completely independent of external jurisdiction. English Medieval colleges were sovereign, self-governing communities of fellows. In the English colleges the fellows themselves had the right to remove unsuitable masters and to co-opt new members. It was up to the community of the fellows to judge the quality of their colleagues.

The French model may be considered to be the archetype of quality assessment in terms of accountability. In the French model the power to decide what should be studied and who could be allowed to teach at the university was in the hands of an external authority. The guild masters were accountable to the chancellor for the contents of their teaching.

The English model is the expression of what we nowadays call quality assessment by means of peer review. The masters decided among themselves what should be taught and who should teach.

The French and the English models can, I think, be considered to be two important dimensions of any present-day system of quality assessment in higher education. Both the dimension of providing accountability (the French model) and the dimension of peer review (the English model) are crucial elements of present-day quality management systems in higher education.

These two dimensions refer to the two sub-categories of the general concept of quality that have always played a central role in higher education. Looking at the history of higher education, it can be argued that higher education has always had both intrinsic and extrinsic qualities. The intrinsic qualities refer to the ideals of the search for truth and the pursuit of knowledge. The extrinsic qualities are related to the services higher education institutions provide to society. Already in the early days of higher education, these two categories of quality can be found. Higher education institutions have always espoused the values and ideals of the search for truth and the disinterested pursuit of knowledge. At the same time through the centuries the institutions of higher education have been able to respond to the needs of society. Higher education institutions have adapted themselves with great flexibility to the changing needs and opportunities in their environment. By combining both intrinsic and extrinsic qualities, higher education institutions have been able to show a remarkable historical persistence. The combination of intrinsic and extrinsic qualities has helped higher education institutions to capture their important place in history and society.

2 The recent call of higher education quality assessment

Since the early 1980s quality has become a central concept in many discussions on higher education. In the United States and Canada the debates on the various approaches and instruments with respect to quality assessment have intensified. In the United Kingdom (in 1984) quality was declared to be a principal objective for higher education. In France the 'Comité National d'Evaluation' (CNE) was set up. In the Netherlands an influential policy-paper was published in which quality played a major role. In Denmark, Finland, Spain and several other countries the first steps were taken to design a quality assessment system

(Neave & van Vught, 1991, van Vught & Westerheijden, 1993).

There are various factors that can explain this recent increase of attention for quality in higher education. An important factor is the expansion of the various higher education systems. The rapid growth of the student body and the accompanying increase of the number of fields of study, departments and even whole new institutions have triggered questions about the amount and direction of public expenditure for higher education. Another (related) factor lies in the simple fact that the limits of public expenditure have been reached in many countries. Budget cuts and retrenchment operations automatically lead to questions about the relative quality of processes and products in higher education. A third factor concerns the transition process to technology-based economies which in many countries brings along policies to guide student demand to fields that are perceived to be important for further economic development (Neave 1986 p168).

These factors indicate that during the last ten years or so, especially the extrinsic values of higher education have driven many governments to policies of quality control in higher education. The increasing costs of higher education systems had to be legitimised by clearly definable societal benefits. And for this, mechanisms and procedures of quality assessment were necessary.

New systems of quality assessment and quality control have been (or are being) developed in several countries. But, while it may be clear that the extrinsic values of higher education are important factors stimulating these developments, it appears to be difficult to combine in the new systems of quality assessment on the one hand the government's goals regarding the national higher education

system and on the other hand the views and characteristics of the higher education institutions.

In the rest of this paper I will briefly discuss the experiences with quality assessment in a few relevant countries. From this discussion I will try to deduce a number of elements of a general model of higher education quality assessment, which may be applicable in various contexts.

3 Experiences in the USA and Canada

As is well known, in the United States and Canada, the market is the dominant form of co-ordination in higher education. Competition between higher education institutions is something which is generally accepted. Higher education institutions are organised on a basis which to a considerable extent is similar to private corporations. There is considerable power at the top of the higher educational institution. And these institutions have a board and a president, rather like private corporations. Although the influence of governmental steering is not completely absent, compared to for instance continental Europe, this influence is limited. The higher education institutions in the United States and Canada are supposed to regulate themselves. If they do not, they will loose resources, students and scholars to their competitors.

In the United States the growing diversity in institutional forms and the initial lack of centrally defined standards led by the late nineteenth century to a level of chaos in the US higher education system. If the institutions would not have addressed this increasing level of chaos, strong government intervention would probably have become unavoidable. Because such an intervention was not attractive to the higher education institutions, the institutions took the

initiative themselves to develop two processes of quality assessment (Kells 1989).

The first process of quality assessment is accreditation. Accreditation of a higher education institution or of a specific study programme within an institution consists of a procedure of self-assessment by the organisation seeking accreditation, followed by a visit of a team of external assessors and a final discussion, by a peer-board using pre-existing accreditation standards, on the question whether or not to give accreditation.

In the US accreditation has two forms. The first is *institutional accreditation*, conducted by regional bodies that are controlled by the higher education institutions themselves. The second form of accreditation is *specialised accreditation* conducted nationally by profession controlled bodies.

The second process of quality assessment in American higher education, is the intra-institutional process of systematic review of study programmes. This review process is being used by universities to assess programme quality, to enhance institutional decision-making, and in some cases to provide a basis for the redistribution of marginal resources within the institution (Barak 1982; Kells & van Vught 1988; Kells 1989). Programme review may become an element of the broader accreditation process but this is not necessarily the case.

In Canada, quality assessment in higher education is somewhat differently organised. In Canada quality assessment has not so much taken the form of a full process of accreditation. In this country two crucial elements of the US type of accreditation have been chosen to be part of the dominant quality assessment approach: self-assessment and

the visits by peers. For example, the technical schools and community colleges in British Columbia have employed such an approach, as has the provincial university of Alberta (Holdaway 1988).

So, in higher education systems with an emphasis on market co-ordination and a high level of institutional autonomy (at least compared to some continental European systems) we find an approach to quality assessment in which the following elements can be found:

a) a process of *self-evaluation*: in some cases the assessment is limited to this element; this is especially the case when the assessment takes the form of an intra-institutional review process;

b) a *review by peers*, usually in the form of a visit by a team of external assessors.

c) finally, especially in the US, these two elements are brought together in a wider system of *accreditation* in which (except for self-evaluation and review by peers) one other element in crucial: the formulation of *standards* that are used to take the decision to give or withhold accreditation.

4 Developments in Western Europe

Contrary to the United States and Canada, the predominant form of co-ordination in the Western European higher education systems is in many countries still state control. With the exception of Britain, the Western European higher education systems have been heavily controlled by governments for a long period of time. In these centrally controlled continental Western European higher education systems institutional autonomy was rather limited (and in

many cases still is) and funding was and generally is provided by the state.
During the 1970s and the 1980s the Western European higher education systems have been confronted with a number of far-reaching changes. Most of these changes can be related in one way or another to a shift in governmental strategies towards higher education. A major underlying political force was the rise to power of conservative governments in many of these countries. The so-called 'value-for-money' approach of these governments with respect to the public sector led to the end of the more or less unconditional government funding of public higher education. In practice this implied, among other things, that public funding of higher education was increasingly becoming linked to the performance of higher education institutions. As a consequence, the question of how to assess the performance, or quality, of higher education became one of the central issues in Western European higher education in the last decade.

A second important development in higher education policy-making in Western Europe is the rise of the governmental strategy of 'self-regulation' (van Vught 1989; Neave & van Vught 1991). During the second half of the 1980s, the ministries of education and higher education institutions, especially in the countries of northwestern Europe, have agreed upon the desirability of more self-regulation by the higher education institutions. Several governments have advocated in this period deregulation by central ministries and increased autonomy of and competitiveness among the higher education institutions.

The establishment of a governmental strategy which is directed towards more autonomy for higher education institutions was generally motivated by governments by the wish to stimulate the innovative behaviour of higher

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education institutions and especially to stimulate their responsiveness to the perceived needs of the economy and of society. Also, there was to be a greater awareness on the part of society and the public about the quality of study programmes, which implied that credible systems of quality assessment should be developed.

In some Western European countries new attempts to set up quality assessment systems arose from the developments described above. A quality assessment system was either initiated by the central governmental authorities (as was the case in France) or it was negotiated between governmental actors and the leaders of higher education institutions (as was the case in the Netherlands). Together with the United Kingdom, these two countries offer a good overview of the recent experiences with quality control in Western Europe. Let me briefly describe the developments in these three countries.

4.1. France

The President of the French Republic and an act of parliament brought into being the Comité National d'Evaluation (CNE) in 1985 as a result of the so-called *Loi Savary*. It was, accordingly, set up in a spirit of concern about the dysfunctions of the traditional, centralized, system of quality control: lack of actual autonomy, uniformity, rigidity, bureaucracy, etc (Staropoli 1991, p45). Given its position in terms of constitutional law, the CNE is a government agency, but it only reports to the president, so it is independent of the prime-minister, the minister of education and other executive agencies.

The CNE quality assessment procedure consists of two parts: institution-wide evaluations and 'horizontal' disciplinary reviews. The evaluations are not specific down

to the individual level, nor do they assess courses: these two levels are covered by the traditional mechanisms. Where necessary and possible, the CNE makes use of existing evaluations and control reports of other agencies that do examine these and other aspects (eg, CNRS research laboratories). The tasks of the CNE are not only concerned with quality assessment, but also with judging, quite generally, the results of the contracts established between higher education institutions and the Ministry of Education. Many factual indicators are, therefore, at the basis of the CNE evaluations, including information as diverse as research and finance. Evaluation results are not used directly for making reallocations of funds, though through the contract negotiations and the annual budget negotiations, a firm link with decision-making is established.

The CNE makes institution-wide evaluations of education, research and management, the argument being that research and teaching are interdependent primary activities of higher education institutions. Also, other aspects of the higher education institution as an environment for teaching and research are examined. Evaluations are undertaken after an invitation by the higher education institution; it is a voluntary procedure, though the CNE has the right to undertake the evaluations it wants. The CNE 'tours' all institutions every eight years approximately. Each audit results in a report on the institution, making recommendations to the persons responsible for institutional management. These reports are public. They are sent, among others, to the ministers responsible for the higher education institutions visited, so as to assure the reports' roles in the negotiations mentioned above. The whole procedure, from invitation to report, takes about one year (see also Neave 1991).

The second part of the CNE procedure (the disciplinary reviews) consists, first, of self-evaluation reports provided by the institution to be visited. These reports are confidential (and include names of individuals). Second, the CNE, the institution involved and government offices collect statistical data. With those two sources and its own visit to the location, an external peer committee makes qualitative judgements, resulting in a public report. The committees work 'horizontally', reviewing all courses in a broad disciplinary area.

Every year, the CNE presents a summary report to the President of the French Republic. In the reports the CNE gives an overview of its institution-wide evaluations. However, no explicit rankings are made of the institutions audited. The character of the reports is sometimes judged to be descriptive rather than analytical (Guin 1990).

4.2. The Netherlands

Following the publication of the policy paper entitled *Higher Education: Autonomy and Quality* (1985), the relationships between the ministry of education and science and the higher education institutions in the Netherlands were restructured. In exchange for a greater degree of financial and managerial autonomy, the higher education institutions would prove to society (in fact to the government) that they delivered quality education. Originally, the government intended this evaluation to be executed by the, partly newly-established, Inspectorate for Higher Education (IHO). In subsequent discussions the umbrella organizations of the higher education institutions, the Association of Co-operating Universities in the Netherlands (VSNU) for the universities and the HBO Council for non-university higher education institutions, took HBO responsibility on themselves. The IHO was

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bypassed through that compromise and was largely left with the task of 'meta-evaluation': evaluation of the evaluation, and evaluation of the *follow up* on assessment results by the higher education institutions. A pilot project was held by the VSNU in 1988. As a consequence of the evaluation of the pilot project some adjustments were made and the quality assessment procedure became operational in 1989. In 1990 the HBO Council started a procedure in the non-university sector that, although not completely similar to the VSNU approach, is based on the same basic principles.

For reasons of brevity I shall concentrate here on the VSNU system. The focal point of the VSNU quality assessment procedure is the visiting committee that reviews all study programmes in a given area of knowledge in the country; the approach is by disciplinary fields, rather than institutional. In a fixed six year cycle, in principle all study programmes are covered by the procedure.

In preparation for the visiting committee, each participating study programme is required to write a self-evaluation. As the aims of the self-evaluation are not only to prepare the faculty for the visiting committee, but also to stimulate internal quality management (Vroeijenstijn & Acherman 1990, p 88), the content of the self-evaluation is not fixed completely: the faculties and departments to be evaluated can stress points which are important to them. However, for reasons of comparability, a fixed format is given by the VSNU checklist (VSNU 1990). The self-studies of all participating study programmes are collected by the visiting committee before it starts on its 'tour' of the country.

The visiting committees consist of about seven members, including at least one foreign expert in the field. The members of the committee are proposed by the collective

deans of the participating faculties and nominated by the board of the VSNU. The committee visits each study programme for, normally, two or two and a half days. During this period the committee speaks with representatives of all interest groups in the faculty, including students. To enable non-selected voices to be heard, an 'open hour' is part of the procedure. Subjects for the talks are taken from the self-evaluation, from the committee's prior visits and other (usually considerable) knowledge of the field and the faculty, and whatever else comes up during the visit. At the end of the visit, the chair gives an oral, temporary judgement about the quality of the study programme. Based on the written version of this judgement and the (factual) comments of the study programmes, the visiting committee then writes its final report. The report usually contains a general part, stating problems, outlooks, expectations and recommendations pertaining to all of the field, and chapters about the individual study programmes.

The recommendations in the visiting committee report supposedly lead to improvements in the study programmes, together with the measures taken based on the self-evaluations in anticipation of the visiting committee.

As a result of the agreements of 1986, the Ministry of Education and Science has not taken any action on the basis of the visiting committees' judgements. It was thought that the introduction of the system should not be hampered by direct consequences for decision-making and funding. Direct links to funding and other aspects of government decision-making would lead only too easily to strategic behaviour on the part of the higher education institutions, which would undermine the quality assessment system completely.

4.3. The United Kingdom

In the United Kingdom, two models of quality management have been developed since the enlargement of government influence over higher education in the 1960s. The first model applies to the sector of non-university higher education, the polytechnics and colleges. Much later, quality assessment was extended to university higher education too. I shall characterize these models in their chronological order. After doing so, I will discuss the new arrangements with respect to quality assessment that are a result of the 1991 white paper *Higher Education: A New Framework*, formalized in the *Further and Higher Education Act* of 1992.

Since the first half of the 1960s non-university higher education in the UK was under the aegis of the Council of National Academic Awards (CNAA), (Brennan 1990). As in other countries, quality in this higher education sector was also controlled by Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI), which continued to exist, with its own responsibilities and methods, alongside the new CNAA. The main characterizing element of HMI procedures was classroom observation.

The CNAA, a government-initiated body, was independent: it obtained its own royal charter in 1964. It was a degree-awarding body, giving out degrees of a professedly equal level to those of universities (bachelor's degree). The CNAA validated proposed courses in colleges and polytechnics *ex ante* and reviewed them quinquennially. For a long time the committees consisted of peers, i.e., academics working in the same area of knowledge but in other higher education institutions (colleges, polytechnics *and* universities), plus, if applicable, representatives of the relevant profession or industry. These committees based

their visit on detailed written information regarding the structure and content of the course, ways and methods of teaching and student assessment, and available resources (research and teaching qualifications of the staff members who were expected to become involved, physical equipment, etc). In the frequent cases of disapproval by the committee a new round, based on an amended proposal, would start.

The peer review of courses was complemented by a, usually quinquennial, review of the institution's own operational (i.e., not just existing on paper) mechanisms to assure the level of its courses. Later, since 1988, the CNAA *accredited* a number of polytechnics to validate their own courses (undergraduate and postgraduate degree level) through this procedure of monitoring the institutional quality management procedures.

Based on this tradition of government-independent quality assessment, the CNAA and the funding organisation of the public sector higher education institutions, the Polytechnics and Colleges Funding Council (PCFC), tried to liberalize the evaluation culture developing in the 1980s, which was becoming more and more government-centred, by taking account of the institution's goals and aims.

When, in 1992, the binary system in the UK was abolished, the CNAA ceased to exist. Its activities end more or less with the academic year 1991-1992.

The turning points in quality management for British universities were two reports in the mid-1980s: the Reynolds report to the Universities' Grants Committee (UGC) and the Jarratt report to the Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals (CVCP). In the Reynolds report criteria were laid down for internal quality management

systems which all universities would be required to introduce in the following years. The Jarratt report was the focal point for the discussion of performance indicators and their role in quality-based funding.

The Academic Audit Unit (AAU) was introduced in 1990-1991 by the umbrella organisation of the universities, the Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals, reputedly to counter the threat of Her Majesty's Inspectorate to extend its control to the universities (Young, 1990). Before, each university individually took care of its own quality control. The external, comparative aspect in this system consisted of the external examiners. Views on the effectiveness of these external examiners in terms of quality assessment differ. However, this approach was judged to be an insufficient mechanism for providing accountability towards society in general and to the government in particular. The AAU had to fill this gap.

The AAU activities were a form of 'meta-evaluation'. It did not evaluate the quality of higher education, but the quality of the institution's evaluation methods. The core of the AAU quality assessment procedure consisted of an on-site visit by an *audit team*. The teams consisted of academics, as a rule two or three persons. The choice of institutions to visit resulted from 'negotiated invitation'. In preparation for its (usually three day) visit the audit team received written information from the university on the quality assessment systems it had, plus - if requested - a small number of examples of the application of these systems. The AAU had a checklist based on good practice against which to assess an institution's quality assessment mechanisms. From this documentation together with the information gathered during the on-site visit the audit team drafted a short report for the university as a whole and, if necessary, confidential reports on 'sensitive issues' to the Vice-Chancellor.

Following the institution's comments on this draft a final version was written of the official report. The AAU did not itself publish the report, but the university was encouraged to do so.

The changes following the 1991 white paper have led to profound changes in the organisational structure of the intermediate level in the UK higher education system (between the individual institutions and the Department of Education); new procedures for these organizations have been drawn up.
Organisationally, the changes include primarily the following. First, the collective of heads of higher education institutions established the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC) with a Division of Quality Audit, into which the AAU has been subsumed. The work of the CNAA in supporting and enhancing quality will also be developed for all of higher education by this Council. Second, the former funding councils (UFC and PCFC) have been transformed into three new funding councils, one for England, one for Wales and one for Scotland. These have set up Quality Assessment Committees to assist them in making funding decisions based on the quality of teaching in the separate institutions.

The white paper also has led to the introduction of very specific meanings for the following terms in the British context:

- quality control: 'mechanisms within institutions for maintaining and enhancing the quality of their provisions';

- quality audit: 'external scrutiny aimed at providing guarantees that institutions have suitable quality

control mechanisms in place' (this is the responsibility of the HEQC);

- quality assessment: 'external review of, and judgements about, the quality of teaching and learning in institutions' (this is the responsibility of the funding councils).

In this way higher education institutions will be audited by one agency, and assessed by another. The quality audits by the HEQC resemble the basic principles of the AAU: an investigation of the quality control mechanisms and policies present in the individual institutions by a small team of external experts, including *in loco* audit trails to examine the practice of quality control.

Although on a more detailed level differences can be found between the approaches of the English and the Scottish funding councils (the Scottish funding council taking, eg, a slightly more explicitly developmental and quality improvement oriented stance than the English one), on a general level they are fairly similar. Basically, the faculties are asked to provide information about themselves, in writing, on a limited number of indicators, and on their programme, resulting in a claim for 'excellent' or 'satisfactory' quality of teaching. The funding councils will compose small visiting committees from a pool of experts (primarily disciplinary peers), to assess and visit all institutions claiming excellence, all those where - based on information available to the funding council - weaknesses may be encountered, and to examine a sample of other institutions. Each visiting committee is selected to visit one institution; no effort is made to set up a nation-wide system of comparisons. The committees' judgements are summarized as 'excellent', 'satisfactory' or 'unsatisfactory'. In what way, through which 'formula' (if any), the

judgements will inform the funding decisions is not yet completely clear.

To what extent the practices of quality audit and quality assessment amount to the same thing in practice, cannot be told yet. Some fears exist that, eg, an audit trail into the practice of quality control in a faculty will closely resemble the quality assessment of that same faculty.

5 A general model of higher education quality assessment

Looking at the experiences with quality assessment systems both in the USA and Canada, and in the Western European countries just mentioned, it can be argued that in all these systems a number of similar elements are found that can be combined into the core of a general higher education quality assessment system. The various systems described before (as well as all other systems, not mentioned here) of course have their own characteristics that apply to their own specific circumstances. But these systems also show some similar elements that can be combined into a general model.

Crucial in such a general model is, I think, the assumption that quality assessment in higher education should have both an intrinsic and an extrinsic dimension. In any sensible system of higher education quality control both the traditional English model of a review by peers and the historical French model of providing accountability to external constituencies should be incorporated. Focusing on only one of these two models leads to a risky overestimation of specific functions and practices of higher education institutions. A quality control system which only takes place by means of collegial peer review without any reference to the needs outside the higher education system, implies the risk of an extreme isolationism of the higher

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education institutions from the rest of society (and thus the danger of the denial of legitimacy of their existence). A quality control system which is limited to only providing accountability to external authorities denies some of the basic organisational characteristics of higher education institutions and therefore implies the risk of not being taken seriously by the academic experts.

What then could be common elements of a general model of higher education quality assessment?

A first element concerns the managing agent (or agents) of the quality assessment system. Such an agent should be independent and have the responsibility to manage the system at a *meta-level*. The meta-level agent should be the co-ordinator of the quality assessment system, acting independently from government politics and policies and not having the task to impose upon the institutions an approach that the government deems to be necessary. The meta-level agent should preferably have some legal basis. Its co-ordinating task should imply (after consultation with the institutions) the formulation of procedures and formats that can be used by the institutions. In these procedures and formats consistent statistical information can be indicated as highly relevant. The experiences in the various countries in Western Europe show that exactly this meta-level role is of great importance to obtain acceptance of the system. The Academic Audit Unit in the United Kingdom neither inspected courses nor programmes, nor did it validate courses. The AAU only monitored and commented on the mechanisms by which the institutions themselves assured the quality of the programmes they offer. Similarly, in the procedures used by the Council for National Academic Awards since 1985, the institutions were encouraged to undertake their own quality review processes. While the CNAA kept its responsibility for the final approval of the

courses leading to its awards, the quality assessment mechanism first of all had to do with the institution's capacity to identify its strengths and weaknesses and to improve its quality. In the new British systems, two meta-level agents exist, namely the Higher Education Quality Council, 'owned' by the collective universities, and the funding councils, which are tied more closely to the governmental services. The Association of Co-operating Universities in the Netherlands (VSNU) follows a strategy similar to that of the CNAA and the HEQC. In the quality assessment system in the Netherlands emphasis is put on the institution's self-evaluation and the visit by peers. The Association itself only operates as the coordinator of the system.

A second common element may be deduced from both the North-American and the Western-European experiences. These experiences indicate that any quality assessment system must be based on *self-evaluation* (or: self-study, self-assessment). It is often argued in the higher education literature that, in order for academics to accept and implement changes, they must trust and 'own' the process in which problems are defined and solutions are designed. This is certainly also the case in quality assessment. Only if the academics accept quality assessment as their own activity, will the system be successful. Self-evaluation is a crucial mechanism for academics to accept a quality assessment system. Moreover, in a self-evaluation process (or in any set of activities in a higher education institution with a focus on internal quality assessment) consulting processes with outside actors (employers, alumni) is of great importance.

A third common element in a general model of quality assessment certainly appears to be the mechanism of *peer review* and especially one or more *site visits* by external

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experts. It is crucial that these external experts should be accepted by the institution to be visited as unbiased specialists in the field. They can come from many constituencies (including employers' organisations, industry and professional bodies) and, depending on the nature of the visit (review of content and level of a specific study programme, or management audit at the institutional level), they will need to have specific backgrounds (academic expertise, managerial experience, etc). The external visitors should visit the institution (or faculty/department) for a period of a few days, during which they can discuss the self-evaluation report and the plans for future innovations with the faculty. The visitors could also take the opportunity to interview staff, students, administrators and (if possible) alumni. This element appears to be used successfully in both North American and Western European quality assessment systems. In the USA and Canada a visit by peers always has been a crucial aspect of the various assessment systems. In the UK the CNAA emphasized the visit by a committee of peers. The Academic Audit Unit saw the visit as an intense and concentrated activity (Williams, 1991, pp 7,8). The procedures developed since the changes in British higher education in 1992 continue this emphasis. Although for reasons of economy the funding councils abstain from visits to all faculties, all those whose quality is claimed or expected to deviate from the average will be visited, plus a sample of the 'satisfactory' ones. In France the *Comité National d'Evaluation* organises at least two visits to each university being reviewed. In the Netherlands a team of external experts visits each programme site of a specific discipline.

A fourth element of a general model of quality assessment concerns the *reporting* of the results of and experience with the methods used. Regarding this element it may first of all be pointed out that some form of reporting the conclusions

of the peer review team is very useful. However, looking at the experiences, such a report should not have the function of judging or ranking the institutions or programmes that have been visited. It rather should have as its main objective to help the institutions and study programmes to improve their levels of quality. A crucial phase in the reporting process therefore concerns providing the opportunity to the institutions and units that have been visited to comment on a draft version of the report and to formulate counter-arguments if necessary. Also, in the final version of the report higher education institutions should be able to indicate possible disagreements with the peer review team. Reporting the results of the quality assessment processes is an important mechanism in the process of providing accountability to external constituencies. However, there appear to be various ways of offering such a report and each has its specific advantages and disadvantages. One way is to publish the complete report and, by so doing, offer it to all those who might be interested. The advantage of such an approach is that each constituency can immediately and clearly find out what the outcomes of an assessment have been and how these outcomes relate to their norms and criteria. A disadvantage of this approach is that it may severely limit the commitment of those who are visited to engage in open discussions with the peer review team, simply because they fear the effects of their frankness when the results of the review are published. A second way to report on the results of the peer review is to offer the detailed individual reports only to the institutions visited and to guarantee confidentiality. To the external constituencies (and to society at large) a general summary of the report can be presented, which may be used as a mechanism for providing accountability. The advantage of this approach is that the commitment of those who are visited will be high. The disadvantage is that some external constituencies might

not be satisfied with only a summary of the report, out of fear that information is being withheld from them.

Regarding this element, the approaches in the various countries differ. In the USA and Canada the reports are usually kept confidential. In France, the CNE publishes its reports on the institutions. The institutional self-evaluations are kept confidential, while the report by the external experts is public. In the Netherlands, although in the pilot phase the reports on the individual study programmes of the external visitors were kept confidential, since the system has been fully implemented the final reports, including the 'local reports', have been made public. The argument for doing so is the accountability objective. In the procedures of the British Academic Audit Unit the audit report was intended to provide an accurate account of an institution's quality assurance mechanisms. The report thereby drew attention to good and bad practice. The report was first of all written for the institution and the Academic Audit Unit itself did not publish the reports. It was for the institution to decide what publicity to give to its reports, although it was assumed that the report 'finds its way into the public domain accompanied by a commentary prepared by the university' (Williams 1991, p10). However, the HEQC intends to publish reports as do the Funding Councils' Quality Assessment Committees.

A final common element of a general model of quality assessment concerns the possible relationship between the outcomes of a quality review system and the (governmental) decisions about the funding of higher education activities. Based on the experience of quality assessment in especially Western Europe so far, I can argue that a *direct, rigid* relationship between quality review reports and funding decisions should not be established. By a direct, rigid relationship we mean that the quality

judgements are the only input into the funding process, which, moreover, is a simple, eg linear, function of the quality judgement: 'good' education means *x* extra money, and 'bad' education means *x* money less. Such an 'automatic' direct relationship will probably harm the operation of a quality assessment system. All the more so as funding decisions presently tend to be cut backs (negative sanctions) rather than incentives (positive sanctions). The danger of this is that it may lead to a compliance culture, the only aim of which will be to appear to meet the criteria formulated, irrespective of whether those criteria are appropriate in the context of specific institutions or not. In such a rigid relationship academics and institutions will distrust the external review teams and they will produce self-evaluation studies in compliance with perceived criteria but with little real interest. Relating a system of rigid and direct rewards and sanctions to the delicate mechanisms of quality assessment may have a very negative effect on the operation of the system. In France, the Comité National d'Evaluation has understood these dangers. The evaluations performed by the Committee do not have a direct impact on state subventions to the institutions. The new procedures for quality assessment in the United Kingdom also do not imply a *direct* relationship between quality management and funding on a large scale. Moreover, the amounts of money involved in the funding councils' judgements seem to be fairly marginal for the moment, thereby mitigating any possible negative effect. Also, the quality audits of the new Higher Education Quality *Council*, continuing the role of the AAU, have no *direct* link to funding either.

The above does *not* imply that an *indirect*, non-automatic relationship between quality management and funding decisions should also be rejected. On the contrary, as the experiences in the USA and Canada as well as the new

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approaches in France and the United Kingdom show, such an indirect relationship, where quality judgements are one - but not the only one - of the inputs into the policy processes leading to funding decisions, could very well be part of the general model of quality assessment suggested here. An indirect relationship would imply that national governments will only provide the necessary financial means to higher education institutions if these institutions (and the various units within these institutions) can show that they have submitted themselves to at least one external judgement which is an accepted part of the general quality assessment system. Only if higher education institutions can show that they have offered their educational programmes for external review, should these institutions be eligible for governmental funding. Whether the funds provided by government are used to reward programmes that have been judged to be of good quality or to help programmes that received a negative qualification by an external review team, should be the decision of the higher education institution itself. It should be left to the discretion of the higher education institutions how they react to the outcomes of the quality assessment system. The decision to fund or not to fund an institution (or certain programmes within an institution) should, in this approach, only depend upon the willingness to submit the institutional activities to outside review.

The elements presented here (touching upon the meta-level role of managing agent(s), upon self-evaluation, upon peer review and site visits, upon the degree of confidentiality of reporting, and upon the relationship between quality review outcomes and funding) together form the core of what could be called a general model of higher education quality assessment. In this model both the intrinsic and the extrinsic values of higher education are addressed. As such, the elements of the general model combine the two

traditional approaches to quality assessment that are found in the history of higher education. By doing so this general model relates the present-day experiences with the historical roots of higher education quality assessment.

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